
C.J. W. L. Wee. *Culture, Empire, and the Question of Being Modern*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003. Pp. xviii, 231. \$26.95 USD.

Culture, Empire, and the Question of Being Modern is an important study that makes a significant contribution to the various discourses addressing the relationship between centre and margin, occident and orient, and, most obviously, the relationship between the modern and the primitive. Wee's project is ambitious in its effort to reverse the flow of post-imperial discourse, to focus upon the impact of the margin on the centre, the primitive on the "civilized." His founding assumption is that modernity is itself a fractured and contested territory, not a straightforward good, in the eyes of the imperial centre, that the "civilizing" project of imperialism is not immune to debilitating doubts about the merits of the very civilization imperialism exports. In Wee's view, these doubts have not been adequately addressed, and, instead, they have been conveniently recast in the simple terms of an unreflective, arrogant colonizer and a helplessly malleable colonized. He maintains that "the general focus [of the discourse of imperial modernity] has been too much on how the colonized have their identities and cultures reinscribed by the more advanced colonizer, on how the colonizer gains a superiority complex" (xi) and not enough on how the presence of the colonized (both in terms of a primitive subjectivity and a frontier landscape) might reinscribe the colonizer's vision of western culture. Addressing the work of Charles Kingsley, Rudyard Kipling, T.S. Eliot, and V.S. Naipaul, Wee focuses on the English imperial centre and wonders, "why the world's first modern industrialized society desires what it conceives to be the 'primitive' and the rural?" (xi), or, put another way, "why does a triumphant modernity breed a longing for tradition?" (198).

These are good questions, and Wee goes a long way toward answering them. He posits a complex set of "links between culture, modernity, nationalism, colonial masculinity, and notions of the primitive as they pertain to a national imperialism with a desire for re-creating an organic homeland" (2). Essentially, Wee argues that the colonial frontier acts as a dominant trope for cultural unity and spiritual and physical strength at a time when notions of "true" English masculinity are/were slipping away at home. While this is, in some ways, simply a re-formulation of well-established forms of colo-

nial schizophrenia, of the colonizer's "simultaneous desire and aversion for the Other" (15), Wee's construction is important because it emphasizes the colonizer's schizoid approach to his own culture, rather than the "culture" of the frontier. In Wee's view, people like Kingsley and Kipling conceived of the colonial encounter in terms of "an alternative or counter-civilization to effete and supposedly advanced metropolitan life" (5). That is, the colony's primary good might be to educate, masculinize, and "reracinate" (9) the degenerate Englishman, not save the benighted savage.

Obviously, any admission of English cultural degeneration compromises the self-assurance needed to fuel the imperialist impulse, and Wee devotes most of his book to an investigation of the logical, psychological and, frequently, theological contradictions and dead-ends his writers bump into as they struggle to maintain an unambiguous sense of English (or, in Eliot's case, European) cultural superiority, while simultaneously resorting to the rural and the primitive (i.e. that which is emphatically not modern and "cultured") whenever they attempt to cure the social ills they find in the imperial centre. The dilemma, as Wee sees it, is this:

If "civilized" can also mean "decadent" then England had better (re)acquire something of the "primitive." The problem? That 'primitiveness' can also turn into "savagery." Hence, we had also better keep a restraining modicum of the civilized aspects of modern culture along with the primitive and let the colonized keep the "savage" aspect. (15)

Obviously, this is a delicate balance, one that none of his authors can manage. The effort to fend off the "national degeneration" (46) that was to be found in modern urban life, is, in the end, short-circuited by a still-surviving sense of superiority, a countervailing paranoia about the threat of barbarism, and a general unwillingness "to affirm common origins [and dignities] for all men" (59). They all strive, in different ways and to different degrees, for "*an unrealizable balance* between the primitive and high culture" (126); none finally achieves a "stable perspective on English identity" (50).

Structurally, the book is straightforward: a substantial introduction, followed by four main chapters, with each devoted to a single author, and with authors arranged chronologically, beginning with Kingsley's Victorian world and ending with Naipaul's problematically postcolonial one. As one might expect, assumptions about the "core" of English masculinity become less and less firm as time passes. Kingsley's "masculine, charismatic, and authoritative Englishman who stands as a representative of a resolutely Anglo-Saxon and Protestant nation-empire" (38) undergoes a series of transformations (typi-

cally reductions) to arrive at Naipaul's considerably more ambivalent, secularized (likely lower cased) "englishness," an englishness in which a "colonial who has inherited the baggage of Victorian high culture" (186) might as well lay claim to a constantly reinvented "phantasm of home" (186).

Wee's treatments become more nuanced as his subjects become more nuanced. While the chapters on Kingsley and Kipling frame the impulse toward a muscular, imperial masculinity in terms of a "still primitive" rural world with "regenerative potential" (104), the chapters on Eliot and Naipaul are more complex, informed by the amorphous notions of home, empire, and "English culture" necessitated by the realities of Anglophiles who are not "truly" English in any essentialist sense. The handling of Eliot, in particular, is subtle, and, to me, impressive. While recognizing the disturbing and unpleasant nature of some of the poet's thought, Wee delicately maps the disjunctions between Eliot's strident religious convictions and his seemingly eclectic cultural stance. The poet's rejection of cultural isolationism (and its links to nationalist aggression) and his desire for "a constellation of cultures" (*Notes towards the Definition of Culture* 132) both in Europe and inside England, cannot finally be reconciled with a more dogmatic view that a common religious faith must underlie all cultural enterprises and that Christianity is *the* faith of culture. The idea of a wide-scale constellation of cultures (beyond the boundaries of Eliot's beloved Roman Empire) falters because, in Eliot's view, "antagonistic religions must mean antagonistic cultures" (*Notes towards the Definition of Culture* 136). As a result, the "only hope of penetrating to the heart of the mystery world [of a foreign culture] would lie in forgetting" Western cultural and religious heritage (*After Strange Gods* 41). This is something Eliot plainly does not wish to do, but, even so, Wee's depiction of Eliot as a problematic "radical" who "cannot easily be classified or written off as simply being 'reactionary'" (133) is convincing. For Wee, Eliot, like the rest of the writers he studies, is not a straightforward autocrat, but a man divided against himself, someone caught between his rigid principles and a desire to remake his cultural world; he's someone who wants "a world culture in which various national, religious, and ethnic differences are not eliminated" (116), but who "cannot see through to the end his own insights on fluid cultural identity" (143). At the very least, Wee's treatment suggests some interesting and improbable connections between High Modernism and subaltern studies.

Wee's book closes with an epilogue addressing the impact of modernity on his native Singapore. Characterized in terms of "an anti-neocolonialism [that is] strangely at home with global capitalism" (201), Singapore is, in some ways, "a future oriented society" (205), one which, for a long time, "tried to

forsake completely *any* primordial past" (202). As such, it seemed to prosper in the absence of the more historical and self-consciously "traditional" obsessions that trouble his writers, who are constantly preoccupied with matters to do with deracination and cultural decline. For Wee, Singapore's prosperity seems to suggest that the anxieties of *Western* modernity might not be the anxieties of all modernities, that "East Asia . . . perhaps had developed a modernity based on its own way of doing things" (213). He does not finally affirm such a conclusion, however, and instead recognizes that the "homogenizing force of a universal industrial spirit" cannot fully erase the fear of "cultural deracination" and "emasculatation" (208) that seem to be modernity's handmaidens; that is, he acknowledges that these fears have become more prevalent in Singapore, particularly since the country's economic machine has sputtered. It is an intriguing conclusion, emphasizing both the problems and the lure of "a rational and civilized traditionalism" (213) in the face of the pressures industrial modernity brings.

Wee does not always write well. His sentences can be cumbersome and his sense of logical and grammatical continuities is sometimes idiosyncratic and confusing, but this is an intelligent and engaging book, one which strives to re-think both the colonial encounter and Western modernity in productive and illuminating terms. It's well worth reading.

Lewis MacLeod

Works Cited

- Eliot, T.S. *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1934.
- . *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. 1949. *Christianity and Culture*. New York: Harcourt, 1969.